

Transizioni in Europa e in America Latina  
(1945-1995)

Storiografia, politica, istituzioni

a cura di  
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EASTERN EUROPEAN TRANSITIONS, 1945-1989: FROM TRANSITIONS TO SOCIALISM TO "POST-COMUNIST" TRANSITIONS

*di Guido Franzinetti*

1.

Historically speaking, the term "transition" is used to describe four processes. The first is the transition from feudalism (or any other pre-capitalist socio-economic formation) to capitalism. This is present in Marxist historiographical debates.<sup>1</sup> The second refers to transitions in demographic models in terms of birth and death rates.<sup>2</sup> The third refers to the transitions from capitalist to Socialist systems in Eastern Europe after the Second World War. The fourth process defines the transitions from Socialist to "post-Communist" or capitalist systems after the changes of 1989-1991.

In 1933 Antonio Gramsci pointed out – in his usual elusive manner – the general problem in understanding transitions:

The problem of the unity of theory and practice emerges especially in certain historical moments, so called transition moments, i.e. moments of more rapid transformational movement, in which the practical forces unleashed really require to be justified so as to be more efficient and expansive, or in which there occurs a multiplication of theoretical programmes which also require to be realistically justified, since they demonstrate that they can be assimilated by the practical movements which only in this way can become more practical and real.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Paul M. Sweezy [et al.], *The transition from feudalism to capitalism*, London, Verso, 1978.

<sup>2</sup> Warren S. Thompson, *Population*, "American Journal of Sociology", XXXIV (1929), n. 6, p. 959-975.

<sup>3</sup> Antonio Gramsci, Quaderni 12-29: [1932-1935], critical edition edited by Valentino Gerratana, Torino, Einaudi, 1977, III, p. 1780 ("il problema dell'identità di teoria e pratica si pone specialmente in certi momenti storici così detti di transizione, cioè di più rapido movimento trasformativo, quando

Transitions may also be understood in terms of an acceleration of the historical process. This acceleration can be understood in a variety of ways.<sup>4</sup>

In Marxist debates (whatever definition of Marxism is chosen) the function of the category of “transition” is to challenge naturalistic views of economic development, and to argue in favour of a historical view of economic development. After the collapse of Communist systems, the anti-Marxist view has essentially upended the Marxist view: following the historical detour of socialist planned economies, there has been a return to the natural order of things, the market economy. Both these views reflect the fact that “transition” has been and remains a highly ideological category. It is historically relevant in terms of the history of ideologies, as distinct from the history of societies.

The peculiarity of the debates on transition is compounded by the fact that the term “Cold War” refers to a historical period that is defined with a relatively precise chronology (1917-1991, or 1945-1991) and in strictly ideological terms. This makes it a quite exceptional historical category, which may be compared only to the sixteenth and seventeenth-century “Wars of Religion”. It also renders any evaluation of historiographies of the Cold War an extremely controversial issue.<sup>5</sup>

2.

*Transitions to Socialism.* Any discussion of the establishment of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe immediately raises the issue of whether the Cold War could have been avoided. This issue was always present; it was periodically resurrected, and it continues to reappear,

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realmente le forze pratiche scatenate domandano di essere giustificate per essere più efficienti ed espansive, o si moltiplicano i programmi teorici che domandano di essere anch'essi giustificati realisticamente in quanto dimostrano di essere assimilabili dai movimenti pratici che solo così diventano più pratici e reali”).

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Halévy, *Essai sur l'accélération de l'histoire*, Paris, Self, 1948; Chris M. Hann (ed.), *When History Accelerates. Essays on Rapid Social Change, Complexity and Creativity*, London, Athlone Press, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> The literature on the history of the Cold War is already immense, as demonstrated by the many on-line projects that aim to provide comprehensive listings.

under the guise of some form of historical revisionism. Precisely because the Cold War was predominantly perceived as an ideological conflict, the historiographical conflict is destined to live on, since the ideologies that produced it have not disappeared with the collapse of the state apparatus that dominated the Soviet Bloc. Indeed, it is by no means obvious that the overall picture of the Cold War in Eastern Europe has actually changed that much, following the almost mythical “opening of the archives”. It is sufficient to compare two collections of essays on the Communist seizure of power in 1944-1949 to see how little has changed in the overall picture.<sup>6</sup>

Needless to say, many hypotheses have now been tested. More importantly, many new interpretations have been advanced. But the basic framework has not really changed, nor could it. With reference to the perennial debate on “communist takeover/Soviet conquest” vs. “revolution”, Brian Porter-Szűcs has argued that

Although these competing interpretations have provoked bitter debates, they do not need to be placed in opposition. The revolution was real enough: the late 1940s brought fundamental changes in every country of Europe, and the devastation of Poland left people particularly amenable to radical ideas. Regardless of the Soviet presence, the world of 1939 was gone forever. But if the USSR did not cause the postwar revolution, Stalin most definitely channelled it along paths that few Poles would have chosen on their own.<sup>7</sup>

In reality, the effective distinction among Eastern European countries was between “Defeated” countries, i.e. former allies of the Axis powers (Finland, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria) and “Victims of Axis aggression” (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Albania and Greece). Leaving aside the notable exceptions of Finland and Greece, the distinction between the two categories of countries of the regions

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<sup>6</sup> Martin McCauley (ed.), *Communist Power in Europe 1944-1949*, London, Macmillan, 1977; Norman Naimark, Leonid Gibianskii (eds.), *The Establishment of Communist Regimes in Eastern Europe, 1944-1949*, Boulder (CO), Westview Press, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Brian Porter-Szűcs, *Poland in the Modern World: Beyond Martyrdom*, Oxford, Wiley Blackwell, 2014, p. 186.

explains many of the differences between the kind of Communist regimes which were installed, not least in terms of timing: Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria all had to await the signing of the Paris peace treaties in 1947, and their subsequent ratification by Great Britain, the USA Congress, France and the USSR. The other countries of the region, as "victims" had no such constraint. Czechoslovakia was the only country that experienced a relatively late establishment of a Communist regime, in February 1948.

Needless to say, none of this meant that the Communists in these other countries faced no constraint. Yugoslav Communists exercised significant military power, but had suffered enormous human losses and material damages, and faced a complex internal political situation. Polish Communists faced the problems of an entirely new territorial configuration, colossal human losses, material damages and violent conflict from 1944 until at least 1948. Bulgarian Communists were taking over a state that (unlike most of its neighbours) had remained intact right up until September 1944. Albania was, for all intents and purposes, a Yugoslav protectorate, and had to follow the Yugoslav party line until 1948. The idea that all these countries could follow a single "blueprint" (even if they had wanted to) is simply unsustainable.

On the other hand, the military predominance of the Soviet Army in the region was obvious to all, although in some cases the hope of a military or political intervention by the Western Allies sustained some forms of military action by anti-Communist guerrilla forces.

There is a long-standing historiographical dispute between an "intentionalist" reading of Soviet policy (the Communist "blueprint" for a takeover from 1945 onwards) and a "functionalist" reading of this policy (Soviet policy was to a large extent a reaction to hostile Western policies). The dispute is ultimately ideological. If the "functionalist" reading were correct, it could prove that in the early postwar era there was scope for a "third way" between capitalism and socialism.

These binary interpretations, once again, confuse the issues. There is an issue of the possibility of a non-Communist "third way" in Eastern Europe, less dominated by the Soviet Union: there does not seem to be much evidence of it (leaving aside the case of Yugoslavia, where the Communists were able to construct their own military and police apparatus, since the previous state had been totally dismembered).



Then there is a quite distinct issue of what the Communists *wanted* to do, and what they *could* do (once they had seized power). These are quite distinct issues. The Communist objective was, unsurprisingly, the establishment of a system based on the Soviet model, although the timing of its implementation could vary (as it had to, in countries subject to the constraints of the Paris peace conference). The reality on the ground, instead, brought up all kinds of obstacles to any kind of fast-track Sovietization: wartime destructions, ethnic conflicts, shortage of skilled labour force, illiteracy, cultural and religious resistance. In terms of Communist ideology, the explanation for any delay was simple: conspiracies, enemies of the people who want to block the advance of socialism. This could mean that the enemies (for example, *kulaks*) needed to be identified and repressed. But perhaps there were also traitors infiltrated in the Communist parties, who needed to be unmasked and punished. In terms of anti-Communist ideology, there was an equally good explanation for any (apparent) delay in Sovietization: the people had somehow managed to resist the Communist onslaught.

Some of these explanations (or rationalizations) may have been partly correct, but the fact remained that all Communist systems operated under severe internal and external constraints. It is sufficient to look at the official data provided by Nicholas Spulber in 1957 in his study of Eastern European economies: agriculture, industry and the service sector all demonstrate a wide variety of policies followed.<sup>8</sup>

None of this signifies that there was no *general* "Transition to Socialism" in Eastern Europe. There undoubtedly was a marked differentiation between the various "Roads to Socialism". John Connelly has provided a very convincing description and explanation of the different ways in which East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Poland "Sovietized" their systems of higher education.<sup>9</sup> But historical perspective has been

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<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Spulber, *The Economics of Communist Eastern Europe*, Cambridge (MA), MIT, 1957.

<sup>9</sup> John Connelly, *Captive University. The Sovietization of East German, Czech, and Polish Higher Education, 1945-1956*, Chapel Hill (NC), University of North Carolina Press, 2000; see also his preface to the Polish edition, *Zniewolony Uniwersytet Sowietyzacja szkolnictwa wyższego w Niemczech Wschodnich, Czechach i Polsce 1945-1956*, Warszawa, Instytut Historii Nauki im. Ludwika i Aleksandra Birkenmajerów PAN, 2014.

distorted by the excessive focus on political events in Eastern Europe in 1956 (from the XX Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to the Polish events and to the Hungarian Revolution). In fact, the true "Transition to Socialism" occurred after 1956, in 1958-1962. Those are the years when the *second* wave of collectivization of agriculture took place, all over the Soviet Bloc; when the social effects of the earlier industrialization programmes began to be felt; when the creation of the Berlin Wall took place; when political stabilization finally occurred. *This* is what might be called "Mature Socialism"; in a sense, this is when the Socialist transition is actually completed. *This* is what would be still remembered as "Communism" in 1989 (Socialist Yugoslavia and Socialist Albania were already outside the Soviet bloc; their destinies were quite different from those of the other countries of the region).

3.

*The Transition to Capitalism.* The term "transition" has been lavishly applied to all the political and economic processes that occurred in Eastern Europe after 1989, possibly qualified as "Post-Communist Transitions". It even led to the creation of a new term, "transitology".

The term is even more ideologically laden than it was in the case of the post-war "transitions". The earlier "transitions" broadly corresponded to a fairly clear and accepted sequence of events (whatever people may have thought of them). In the case of the "Post-Communist" transitions, what actually happened is still a matter of dispute. Was it really a case of assertion of "people power" (as some commentators thought, and perhaps still think)? Was it all a clever plot by the Communists themselves, to trick the gullible public? Was it a revolution? If so, was the revolution betrayed?

The trouble with all these suppositions is that the events of 1989 (if not 1991) were, in essence, a process of controlled abdication. This was the case in Poland, where Polish Communists accepted electoral defeat; this was also the case in Hungary, where Communists did the same. In East Germany, the government was openly delegitimized by the Hungarian government (which allowed the illegal exodus of East German citizens) and by the Soviet authorities (which forbade the use of force against demonstrators). In Prague the Armed forces (if not the

police) proved reluctant to intervene in support of the government. In Bulgaria there was a genuine palace coup. Violence erupted only in Romania, but in circumstances that have never been fully clarified. Of course, these processes of controlled abdication could have all gone terribly wrong. Demonstrators lived in real time, and they did not have the benefit of hindsight to know that all these changes would have all worked out peacefully.

There is no need to be a follower of conspiracy theories to work out what happened, and how it happened. The Communist elites, by and large, decided to pre-empt any radical changes by carrying them out, and possibly making sure they managed to benefit from them. In itself, such a process could have been seen as commendable, on the model of the peaceful democratic transition in Spain in the 1970s; indeed, a Polish reform economist had seemed to advocate a course of this kind.<sup>10</sup>

At the time, the Eastern European populations as a whole were so stunned that they did not pay too much attention to the implications of these processes; attitudes ranged from euphoria to apathy (soon translated into low turnout at elections). As time went by, populations began to experience the full costs of economic transitions. For a while, these costs could be compensated – for some social strata – by new openings, new jobs.

In 1997, at the World Bank annual meeting in Washington, D.C., an economist proclaimed that “transition” was now over. So what had actually happened, and what was the balance-sheet going to be?

In reality, the “Post-Communist” transitions never reflected a uniform process, since each country had had a different starting-point. Poland and Hungary had been envisaged as beneficiaries of the European PHARE programme, well in advance of the changes. East Germany was rapidly incorporated into the Federal Republic of Germany (with the mixed benefit of a 1:1 conversion of the East German mark). Czechoslovakia rapidly split between the Czech Republic and Slovakia (each adopting quite different strategies of economic reform);

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<sup>10</sup> Jan Winiecki, *Gorbachev's Way Out? A Proposal to Ease Change in the Soviet System by Buying Out the Privileges of the Ruling Stratum*, London, Centre for Research into Post-Communist Economies, 1988.

Bulgaria followed a quite hesitant path of economic reform (having kept a genuinely post-Communist government for some years); Romania was even more cautious. In short, it is very difficult to discern a uniform process of “neo-liberal” orthodoxy in these different “transitions”.

In a sense, it could be argued that labelling these processes as “transitions” was simply a (verbal) way of reversing the earlier “Transitions to Socialism”. But this did not mean that it was a neat return to the *status quo ante*, let alone a landing in some form of “Actually Existing Neo-Liberalism” (assuming it ever existed). Each country had had a different starting-point in 1945; it continued to follow its own “Path to Socialism”; and it had an even more specific “Exit from Socialism”.

A vision of this kind may appear to be all too sanguine, or simply banal. But it is not. Actually Existing Eastern Europeans have lived through all these “transitions”, and they have not retained any affection for them. The events of 1989 – if they are remembered at all, at least by the younger generations – mean little to them. If they do, the disappointments, the sense of having been cheated prevail. Cheated by whom? By “Them”, of course; *oni*, as Zbigniew Herbert wrote, many decades ago.